

News Environment

Defiant travellers facing eviction say they'll move – to the next field

David Brown hears both sides of a story of fear and resentment in the Essex countryside

As news of the eviction order spread around Europe's largest illegal travellers' site yesterday, families stepped up contingency plans to move to a neighbouring field they already own.

The sprawling site on the outskirts of the village of Crays Hill, Essex, has come to symbolise the tensions

between the Irish travellers and what they call the "settled" community.

The few outsiders who visit the site at the end of a track discover an extraordinary combination of holiday camp, retirement village and slum. Although it is described as a travellers' site there is an aura of permanence.

Many plots contain smart bungalows surrounded by brick walls with iron gates opening on to block-paved driveways. Other plots are more "traditional" collections of caravans joined by cables and gas pipes, but all have immaculate interiors, running water and mains electricity.

However, outside, beside the pot-holed roads, children played amid gas bottles, rubbish and scrap metal as a new Bentley headed a queue of 4x4s, white vans and Range Rovers waiting their turn to exit the site.

As the men headed off to work, their wives and mothers gathered to discuss the Court of Appeal ruling that Basildon Council could evict those families who live to the west of the electricity pylons that divide the site. Although the order applies to only an estimated 400 of the 1,000 residents, almost everyone is affected, as most are related in some way.

The court said that the residents at Crays Hill and the nearby site called Hovefields were "in conscious defiance of the prohibitions of the law". In a judgment seen as a victory for councils throughout England and Wales, three judges ruled that the illegal occupation of 63 families on the land just outside the town of Billericay showed "flagrant disregard" of the law.

The judges also cleared Basildon Council of any allegations of racial discrimination levelled against it by lawyers for the travellers.

During the bitter legal battle the travellers have been accused of manipulating human rights legislation while they claim to be the victims of contrary laws which have driven them off the road while providing no permanent sites.

Local residents have complained about noise, dangerous driving, vandalism, litter, and intimidation. The sight of large cars filling their roads and stories that some of the families own mansions in their native Republic of Ireland, where they spend the summer, have fuelled resentment and rumours of drug dealing and gun crime.

But the travellers insist they make their money from dealing in three-piece suites, paving and car dealing, travelling across Britain and even the Continent in search of work. Many say they have invested life savings in creating the "chalets", where they had hoped to spend the rest of their lives.

Gratton Puxton, a spokesman for the travellers, said that they had already bought up other parcels of land in the area, to which they could move. "There comes a point where you have to put human needs before legal niceties," he said.

The travellers' immediate plan is to live in tents and marquees in a field they have bought behind the current site, which they believe would be legal for 28 days. Plans have been made to take the children and elderly to local church halls when the bailiffs arrive.

"It is very likely that there will be trouble because of the amount of violence being used by the bailiffs would cause a reaction from those not prepared to see their families threatened," Mr Puxton said.

The travellers say they cannot understand why anyone should object to them staying. The former scrapyard off the busy A127 is hardly picturesque and there are few neighbours.

Mr Puxton said: "The Government has told Basildon Council it must

build 11,000 new homes and most of those will be on the green belt. Why not let these families stay where they are and become a model for other authorities?" The travellers would not simply disappear, he said. The law prevented them from setting up home at the roadside and many were now used to fresh water, electricity and inside lavatories.

Mary Ann McCarthy, 13, was in tears when she heard of the court's decision. "Will they come to take us away today?" asked the girl, who lives with her widowed mother, two brothers and sisters. "Will there be trouble?" She attended school for the first time after arriving at the site seven years ago and learnt to read. The idea of returning to travelling seemed unimaginable. "Have you tried living without water and electricity?" she asked. "We'll probably park up in the car park of an Asda to start with. We won't go too far because we like this area." In a nearby chalet another



Mary Anne McCarthy — many of the residents share the name — broke down at the announcement that her home could be towed away.

After lighting a candle before a statue of the Virgin Mary, she joined women from neighbouring caravans who had crowded into her chalet to watch the news on television.

"Try to imagine what it will be like knowing that your home will be destroyed by an earthquake," said Mrs McCarthy, 67. "That's how we're suffering." She had been evicted many times during her life "on the road" before her late husband brought his family to Crays Hill. With failing health he wanted somewhere secure for his wife and their seven children, all of whom live on the site.

Her daughter, Joanna McCarthy, said that relations with the local community had been difficult initially. "The settled people were frightened of us, thought we were out to rob them and we did not trust them," she said. "But the fear has gone down and we are starting to get along. If we have to move we will have to start all over again."

Many local residents disagree, insisting that the disruption and fear worsen with every passing month.

At a recent public inquiry residents complained that they had become a "discriminated minority", outnumbered by the travellers. Some said their homes had become unsaleable.

David Walsh, 56, said: "When I moved here it was a little bit of heaven. My view was over open fields. We've experienced a lot of antisocial behaviour, threats to our lives, shootings and stabbings in the past. Why should anyone have to live like this?"